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The ethics of landscape

Citation for published version:

McClanahan, A 2015, The ethics of landscape: Discourses of cultural and environmental sustainability in the heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site. in L Bourdeau, M Gravari-Barbas & M Robinson (eds), *World Heritage, Tourism and Identity: Inscription and Co-production*. Heritage, Culture and Identity, Routledge, pp. 217-226. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315546315>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.4324/9781315546315](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315546315)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

World Heritage, Tourism and Identity

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A version of this chapter was published in: Bourdeau, L., M. Gravari-Barbas and M. Robinson (2015) *World Heritage, Tourism and Identity: Inscription and Co-production*. Pps. 217-226. Aldershot: Ashgate.

The Ethics of Landscape:

Discourses of cultural and environmental sustainability in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site

Introduction

This article sketches out a particular case in which the ‘values’ of a World Heritage Site (WHS) in Scotland became entangled in competing discourses relating to political and moral economies in the context of a case around cultural and historic ‘sustainability’. In a number of public meetings, media statements and during an official Scottish Government inquiry in 2008, different social and cultural groups debated whether to approve or deny a planning application to construct a wind farm that would provide a substantial output of renewable energy, which would be sited within view of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney (HONO) WHS, inscribed by UNESCO in 1999. Utilizing ethnographic approaches drawn from material culture studies in anthropology and archaeology, I examine the ways in which social actors on both ‘sides’ of the conflict articulated arguments about the potential loss of the aesthetic ‘authenticity’ of the site, its value as a community ‘commons’ and its potential for promoting various forms of social capital for Orkney communities, and Scotland in general. Exploring these threads, and the way they are negotiated and used to inform social action in the present, adds to our understanding of how the management of World Heritage Sites play an active role in using the past to help shape moral codes and visions of ‘the future’ within contemporary societies.

Context

The Heart of Neolithic Orkney (HONO) World Heritage Site (WHS), is a spectacular collection of 5000 year old henge monuments, a settlement site and passage tomb, located in the Western half of the largest island in the Orkney archipelago, around 7 miles north of the tip of the Scottish Mainland. It is lauded in heritage management terms for its high levels of ‘authenticity’ and preservation, as well as its significance in relation to existing bodies of archaeological evidence that trace the origins and cultures of some of the first settlers in the British Isles, and Northwest Europe more generally (Historic Scotland 1999, 2002, 2004, 2008). It is also celebrated both historically and contemporarily for the famed aesthetics of its landscapes, their ‘dramatic’, windswept, treeless, ‘Northern’ settings, and the iconic status of its Neolithic monuments within archaeological history, which also tend to be viewed as symbols that are associated with the myths and origins of Scottish nationhood.

In 2001-2, I undertook one year of ethnographic research that examined how communities living amongst the HONO, as well as visitors from outside Orkney, used, understood and made meaning from their engagement with the various monuments that constitute the site. The resulting insights gained from that research included specific understandings of how power relationships between different heritage organizations and local communities were acted out in the context of the heritage management process, the ways in which the management of the fabric and aesthetics of the site impacted on visitor engagements with it, as well as how the site is used by various social groups for

sociocultural, political and economic purposes in the present (McClanahan 2006a, 2006b, 2007).

In the succeeding years since the publication of much of this research, a private land owner living near the HONO site submitted a planning application to the Orkney Islands Council in 2007 that outlined plans for the construction of a wind farm in the Merranblo region of the Orkney Mainland. The landscape where the site would be situated was within view of the three of the WHS monuments, including the Ring of Brodgar (pictured below). The developer, along with a Scottish renewable energy firm, proposed that the enterprise would be partially community-owned, in that 10% of profits from the eco-efficient energy generated by the three large, white, 900KW turbines would go to the community immediately surrounding the site. Objectors to the development of the site, including local, national and international cultural and natural heritage conservation agencies and organizations (including UNESCO), as well as local authority and academic archaeologists and community interest groups, argued that such a development would threaten the very 'values' upon which the site was inscribed. The aesthetics and authenticity of the monuments, they claimed, would be destroyed if the turbines were to be erected.



This conflict generated highly contentious arguments amongst all interested parties, and was steeped in moral rhetoric on both ‘sides’ from the outset about what the priorities of ‘conservation’ should be within a contemporary society that is concerned both with its history and heritage, but also the well being of its future inhabitants. The various ‘values’ the site is claimed to embody in terms of its narrative worth to human history and origins, and its ‘value’ as a generator of tourism within the Orkney community (boosted by World Heritage status), were publically set against arguments about the role and moral responsibility that the Orkney community and the Scottish nation should have in promoting and providing resources for renewable energy, how the economic future of the community and ‘culture’ could be ensured (and indeed, ‘conserved’) through the profits generated by the wind farm, and the role its members should play in deciding what happened to the development in the consultation process. The planning application for the Merranblo project was eventually rejected by the Orkney Islands Council, owing to the disruption that such a material intervention would cause to the WHS, which,

according to conservations specialists from the International Council on Monuments and Sites, would potentially put the WHS status of the HONO under threat.

Building on my understanding of these ethnographic contexts, gained through original research, as well as my ongoing familiarity with the interests of the parties involved in the management of the Orkney WHS, I engaged in qualitative research relating specifically to the Merranblo development conflict by adopting a strategy for ‘following’ various arguments as they were publically articulated in forms of mass media, in particular, Orkney newspapers, as well as internet forums, local government websites, community interest ‘blogs’ that related to heritage and renewable energy, and official government documents like planning applications and reports about them. Such reflexive strategies, as outlined by ethnographers and other qualitative researchers in recent years (see especially Marcus 1998 and Aull-Davies 2008), require the researcher to ‘connect’ and ‘follow’ discourses about the phenomenon under scrutiny, in order to gain a layered, dynamic and multifaceted understanding of it. I paired this research with an approach that included gaining an understanding the moral ideals bound up with ‘commons’ resources, as discussed below, in order to understand how both sides appealed to different kinds of ethical arguments about the benefits of accepting or rejecting the Merranblo project.

Historic sites as cultural ‘commons’

I argue here that heritage sites have become a kind of contemporary ‘commons’ that, it is often argued, can be used for the positive benefit of communities of people. I propose this in two senses. First, heritage sites are very much seen as cultural ‘resources’ that contribute to the common good of humankind. Indeed, the lexicon adopted in North

American and Australian contexts to explicitly refers to historical and archaeological remains as ‘resources’ that can be physically depleted; a kind of material form that can provide the means for the production of wealth for those who live amongst them (Nonini 2007: 1). This understanding of the commons is very much in line with the ways in which anthropologists and cultural ecologists have tended to discuss and analyze ‘commons’ resources since Garrett Hardin’s famous thesis on *The Tragedy of The Commons* in 1968ⁱ. On the other hand, the idea of heritage sites as a particular form of ‘commons’ is also compatible with other more recent definitions of the kind of resources that have been developed by social scientists and historians of science in the examination of new technologies like the internet, that are said to be a kind of ‘information’ commons that benefit humankind through mass access; that is, *the more they are used, the more valuable they become* (Nonini 2008: 71, *emphasis mine*).

This double-notion of the commons, though contradictory in several senses (the fact that the material fabric of historic sites can be depleted and destroyed through ‘use’, but that their value lies in the information they can provide about past societies to future populations) is useful to apply to the Merranblo case, as it helps us to understand some of the contradictory and competing claims in the way that the social actors involved in the case articulated their arguments, and thus, how discourses of heritage management are constantly negotiated, contested and in tension.

Ensuring ‘cultural’ conservation: development vs. preservation

Drawing on the idea that WHS’s are often used, appropriated and represented as a kind of ‘commons’ that can be used to impact on the lives of those who live amongst them, I

want now to discuss how heritage managers, community groups, archaeologists and developers argued for and against the rejection or acceptance of the project.

Because of the high profile of the case, various community interests, and the public outcry involved in the submission and review of the Merranblo project planning application, an official public enquiry was launched by the Scottish Government to examine the arguments outlined in relation to the case in January, 2008. Throughout the course of the enquiry, community members, heritage managers and agencies, members of local government, and, of course, the developers of the proposed windfarm site, aired their views to a public audience. Specialists from ICOMOS UK were brought in to defend the values of the WHS, as were academic archaeologists from universities around the UK. Specialists from renewable energy companies, local community members, as well as heritage ‘experts’ also defended the morality of placing a development that would benefit both the local community in terms of wealth generation through profit-making from ‘selling’ the energy, as well as humanity at large in the longer term, in Orkney. All of the arguments, whether for or against the development, had interesting points in common; that their invocation of the kinds of social capital described related to the common good. How, then, were these arguments (and the way they are publicly, discursively contested) tied to ideas about community, society and culture, in particular?

Those in favor of the development used the economic benefits of ‘community’ wealth generation and hybrid ‘ownership’ via the social capital generated largely by private enterprise which would ensure community cooperation and potential growth. The developer, speaking in the local newspaper *The Orcadian*, said:

Orkney has a tremendous wind resource. We are trying to do it as a local developer keeping the revenue within Orkney to help the Orkney economy. You have to look at the balance of economic benefit, community benefit and the visual impact.

Those against the project argued against it, invoking the highly rhetorical lexicon of UNESCO policy and analysis, including that any development that threatened the aesthetic, ‘universal value’ of a public (government owned) commons which attracts tourism and profit should be rejected on the basis that common good is under threat. A letter to another local paper, *Orkney Today* (2007), reads:

Some people don’t seem to realize that given current form, the people of Orkney and all businesses that benefit from our vital tourist industry in particular, have more to lose than gain. For example, do we want to risk having the World Heritage Site designation stripped from the Heart of Neolithic Orkney? Surely not.

Those in favor of the project argued that profit generated for the Orkney community via the Merranblo development argued that the project would keep the ‘community’ profitable, modern, alive and dynamic in the face of collapsing traditional industries like agriculture and fishing; that it boosts the role of Scotland as a nation and ‘a people’ in the burgeoning ‘sustainable energy industry’ in Late Capitalist Society; and that it

demonstrates Scotland's environmental awareness, concern and compassion in a within a globalised world threatened by climate change.

Those categorically against the project argued that it: threatens conservation of historic, aesthetic authenticity, historical continuity, tradition, and traditional values in an increasingly globalised world; threatens the role of Scotland on 'World Culture' stage; shows Scotland's important role in creating new aesthetically inspired artists; threatens Scotland's role in creating new scientific knowledge about human origins through WHS-encouraged European Union money to fund new excavations.

Community, authenticity and loss

Yet another strand of arguments featuring in the Merranblo case are appeals to differing notions of 'authenticity' and 'identity', concepts that are central to and valued highly by both heritage organizations like UNESCO and ICOMOS, as well as featuring as a theme in what many visitors seemed to say about the HONO. In 'After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site', the now classic work based on ethnographic work at the Colonial Williamsburg site in the US (1996), Handler and Gable claim that:

Heritage is one form of cultural salvage. A 'lost world' or a world about to be lost is in need of 'preservation' and the museum or heritage site bills itself as the best institution to perform this function..... They are also objective manifestations of cultural, ethnic, or national identity, which outside the museum is often perceived as threatened by collapse and decay.

Handler and Gable suggest here that the morality of identity and loss is often articulated and legitimated through official heritage policy and discourse. In cultural contexts where the past is employed to legitimate cultural histories and practices in the present, people are encouraged to hold sentimental attachments to material things that invoke collective, shared histories. Such sentiments have been explored extensively over the last two decades, and indeed came up time and again in my own interviews with visitors to the HONO, particularly at the henge monuments. The material past is something to be experienced in a pure, unmediated way, separate from the trappings of modernity. The following comment from my research illustrates this, in that the visitor wants to experience the HONO monuments without the visibility of the present:

It [power lines] seems to destroy the natural setting of the site in a way. I mean its, you know, you're standing here looking at things that are thousands of years old, and then you've got the wires, the telephone wires, you know, and you're surrounded by the modern, you've got all this modern stuff."

-Respondent SoS-8, *Monuments in Practice* (McClanahan 2006)

In defense of a similar view of heritage and embodied experience of the HONO WHS, one of the heritage professionals also defended the idea of unmediated encounters with the past. In *The Orcadian* (2007), the individual notes that:

Visitors today value the open, natural, setting of these sites. Comparison with Stonehenge is often made, with many visitors commenting that they prefer the lack of development in the Orkney landscape.

It seems that it was the final appeal to the morality of the loss of authenticity- both materially and in relation to perceived threats of ‘cultural change’ if Orkney were to lose its vital tourist industry vis a vis the potential loss of World Heritage Status- that helped representatives of the Orkney Islands Council rejected the Merranblo project planning application.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted that ethnographic approaches to the study of World Heritage Sites has been and is integral to gaining an understanding of the impact of heritage management practices on communities who live amongst them, as well as demonstrating that qualitative research can illuminate how conflicts and tensions surrounding WHS’s are played out in practice amongst social actors with varying political, economic and cultural interests.

The arguments presented both for and against the Merranblo project all contain moral debates about how the conservation of ‘living’ cultures should be ensured, the well being of humanity at large in relation to the stewardship of the natural world, as well as the potential ‘loss’ of culture through the loss of history and possible economic degradation in the globalised world. Following these arguments, and employing the concept of ‘the commons’ to analyse them provides further evidence of how heritage sites are integral to the ways in which moral values are judged and articulated in contemporary society. The case of Merranblo is of particular interest from an ‘heritage ethnography’ point of view, as it pits a number of arguments about cultural and natural conservation against one another, which at first glance seem diametrically opposed, but on closer analysis, are actually deeply similar in terms of the themes through which they are discursively mediated. They appeal to people’s sense of morality, duty, community, and the idea of working toward a ‘common good’.

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ⁱ Garrett Hardin's classic 1968 paper The Tragedy of the Commons proposed that resources held in common for the benefit of human populations, such as parcels of land that were jointly farmed by members of communities, were in danger of being depleted in

the absence of structures implemented to ‘manage’ their conservation. Some use this work as an example of how/why ‘commons’ should be ‘enclosed’ or privatized to protect them, whilst others argue that commons should be held in trust by governments for the benefits of their populations. Both kinds of solutions are inherently contentious, and the application of the idea of these concepts to ‘heritage’ sites, in particular ‘World Heritage Sites’ is useful in debating their role in contemporary societies and political structures in the postmodern, globalised world.